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The Emergence of Desire

Notes Toward a Political History of the Will

Daniele Lorenzini

Desire as a Historical Transcendental

In the foreword to the French edition of *The Emergence of Sexuality*, Arnold Davidson writes:

“We are our sexuality,” or at least we have been told so over and over. In a sense, there is no doubt that this goes without saying; we would not be able to think of ourselves, of our most fundamental psychological identity, without thinking of our sexuality, of this often deep and secret layer of our desires that reveals the type of individual that we are.¹

This hardly questionable remark was also the starting point of *The Will to Know*, the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*.² “*Au fond du sexe, la vérité*”: at the bottom of sex, there is truth, *our* truth.³ It is remarkable, however, that the problem of the (historical, social, and political) constitution of a specific form of subjectivity as the correlate—both the necessary support and the inevitable consequence—of the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of a

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¹ Arnold I. Davidson, *L’émergence de la sexualité: Épistémologie historique et formation des concepts*, trans. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat (Paris, 2005), p. 9.

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978); hereafter abbreviated *HS*.

³ Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memories of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York, 1980), p. xi.

“science of sexuality” is not explicitly inscribed at the heart of Foucault’s project since the beginning.⁴ The main objective of *The Will to Know* is rather to describe the constitution and principal features of the modern apparatus (*dispositif*) of sexuality (HS, p. 119). Therefore, in the following years, a shift takes place in Foucault’s work which cannot be reduced solely to a chronological change of focus. Foucault’s “Greco-Latin ‘trip’”⁵ brings about a more fundamental transformation: starting from 1980, his history of sexuality focuses on “the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self.”⁶ More precisely, the problem of the formation of *scientia sexualis* is replaced by the question of “how the modern individual could experience himself as *a subject of a ‘sexuality,’*” a question that requires, Foucault argues, a genealogical study of the ways in which “Western man had been brought to recognize himself as *a subject of desire?*” (UP, pp. 5–6; emphasis mine).

The distinction that Foucault implicitly traces here between the *subject of sexuality* and the *subject of desire* has rarely been emphasized, but is crucial. The experience of sexuality having emerged only in the nineteenth century, Foucault is careful not to refer to any (illusory) trans-historical subject of sexuality when he analyses the Greco-Roman experience of bodies and pleasures (*aphrodisia*) or the Christian experience of the flesh.⁷ But how would it be even possible to speak of a Greco-Roman or a Christian “chapter” of a *unified* history of sexuality if

⁴ Although, in the manuscript of his 1964 lectures on sexuality at the University of Clermont-Ferrand, Foucault argues that, “in modern culture, the human being has become an object of scientific investigation because she revealed herself to be both subject to sexuality [*sujet à la sexualité*] and subject of her sexuality [*sujet de sa sexualité*]” (Michel Foucault, “La sexualité,” unpublished manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, box 78).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 2.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1985), p. 30; hereafter abbreviated UP. For the first elaboration of the notion of practices or techniques of the self, see Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago, 2016), pp. 24–25.

⁷ See Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 31–32. When Foucault speaks of an “experience,” he is not referring to the phenomenological notion of *Erlebnis*, but to a specific, *historical* correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity (UP, p. 4). In *Les aveux de la chair*, Foucault defines the flesh as a “mode of experience, that is, a mode of knowledge and of transformation of oneself by oneself, according to a certain relation established between obliteration of evil and manifestation of truth” (Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair: Histoire de la sexualité IV*, ed. Frédéric Gros [Paris, 2018], pp. 50–51; hereafter abbreviated AC).

those ancient experiences were *radically* disconnected to our modern experience of sexuality? The answer, I argue, lies in Foucault's enigmatic claim according to which "desire is in actual fact what I would call the historical transcendental on the basis of which we can and should think the history of sexuality."⁸

Taking this claim seriously, in this essay I argue that desire, or better, a specific notion of desire conceived of as a central and permanent dimension of the human subject, is the *condition of possibility* of the emergence of both the modern experience of sexuality and the mechanisms of power that produced, organized, and exploited it. This condition of possibility, as Foucault himself points out referring to a "historical transcendental," far from being an *a priori* category of reason, was *historically constituted*. This is why the second, third, and fourth volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* aim to retrace a genealogy of the subject of desire.⁹ A genealogy, that is, an investigation that "looks to beginnings" not in order "to capture the essence of things, or to search for some 'immobile form' that has developed throughout history,"¹⁰ but to retrace the accidental, contingent, and unexpected constitution—as well as the historical transformations—of an experience that still matters for us today and that we mistakenly tend to consider as natural, universal, and unchangeable. Thus, my objective in this essay is both to critically reconstruct the way in which Foucault accounts for the progressive emergence of desire as a principle of subjectivation/objectivation of sexual acts in the Greco-Roman and Christian worlds, and to emphasize the socio-political relevance of these early "chapters" of his history of sexuality—an often downplayed relevance that is connected more precisely to what I call a "political history of the will."¹¹

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980–1981*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (Basingstoke, 2017), p. 288; hereafter abbreviated *ST*.

⁹ See David Halperin's review of *The Use of Pleasures*: "[I]n order to analyze the formation and development of the modern experience called 'sexuality' . . . it was necessary first of all to discover the provenance of the one theme common to the otherwise discontinuous experiences of 'sexuality' and 'carnality' (its Christian predecessor)—it was necessary, that is, to trace the 'genealogy' of desire and of man as a desiring subject" (David M. Halperin, "Sexual Ethics and Technologies of the Self in Classical Greece," *The American Journal of Philology* 107, no. 2 [1986]: 274).

¹⁰ Arnold I. Davidson, "Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, 1986), pp. 224–25.

¹¹ In his first lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault describes his (past and current) philosophical project as a series of "fragments for a morphology of the will to know" (Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970–1971*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Daniel Defert [Basingstoke, 2013], p. 1). This

Subjectivation/Objectivation of Sexual Acts

Starting from at least 1980, Foucault's project of a history of sexuality takes the form of a genealogy of the subject of desire, centered on the question of the experience we have of ourselves and of the type of subjectivity that are "linked to the fact that we always have the possibility and right to say: 'Yes, it's true, I desire'" (*ST*, p. 14). It is therefore possible to inscribe this project within the broader one of "a genealogy of the subject" whose aim, as Foucault argues in 1980, is to study "the constitution of the subject across history which had led us to the modern concept of the self."¹² From this point of view, the second, third, and fourth volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* seem to pursue a very similar objective.¹³ It is important, however, to emphasize that Foucault's perspective is uniquely characterized by the crucial role attributed to desire, or better, to the historically constituted centrality of desire in the definition and experience of what we are, and by the claim that the notion of an inner, private space of thoughts and feelings can be—and has actually been—one of the main instruments of our subjection.

How and when did we become subjects of (but also subjects *to*) desire? The last part of *Les aveux de la chair* seems to provide an unequivocal answer: it is in Augustine's writings on virginity and marriage that, properly speaking, a subject of desire is eventually constituted (*AC*, p. 288). However, the reason Foucault gives such an important role to Augustine is not so much, I argue, in order to present him as the ingenious inventor of a completely new form of

project is explicitly inscribed under the sign of Nietzsche's idea that "behind all knowledge [*savoir*], behind all attainment of knowledge [*connaissance*], what is involved is a struggle for power" (Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," trans. Robert Hurley, in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion [New York, 2000], p. 32). However, this project is better captured by the notion of a political history of truth rather than by that of a political history of *the will itself*—the will, that is, this (historically constituted) element of our subjectivity that, I argue, turns out to be paramount to explain both our voluntary servitude and our capacity to disobey.

¹² Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, p. 22.

¹³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 111: "[The opposition 'inside-outside' as a structural feature of our self-understanding] is a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West . . . , but which had a beginning in time and space and may have an end."

subjectivity, but rather because he finds in his writings the first elaboration of a tight correlation between the notion of a subject of desire and that of a subject of law (*sujet de droit*) (*AC*, pp. 351–61). It is precisely this correlation that will later sustain the development of the pastoral arts of government which, in Foucault's view, turn out to be crucial to understand the emergence of the modern mechanisms of governmentality indexed to subjectivity.¹⁴ As for the constitution of a subject of desire, the history that Foucault retraces is more complicated and much longer—one which questions Nietzsche's claim that "it was Christianity with its fundamental *ressentiment against* life that first made sexuality into something unclean."¹⁵

Indeed, in his 1981 lectures on *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault argues that Christianity is not responsible for the "emergence of desire" as a "principle of subjectivation/objectivation of sexual acts" (*ST*, p. 288). Instead, he focuses on a series of philosophical—and notably Stoic—treatises on the arts of living of the first two centuries of the Roman Empire (Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, Hierocles) in which a new experience of *aphrodisia* comes to light and the notion of desire (*epithumia*) acquires an unprecedented relevance.¹⁶

In Classical and Hellenistic Greece, Foucault argues, the "regime" of *aphrodisia* was organized around two fundamental principles. On the one hand, the "principle of activity," that is, the almost exclusive valorization of the act of penetration: "The ethical perception of *aphrodisia* is entirely governed by the point of view of the active individual," and the act of penetration constitutes "the central and natural kernel of all sexual acts" (*ST*, pp. 84–85).¹⁷ This is why Greek sexual ethics, in Foucault's view, gives such a huge importance to self-mastery, that is, the necessity of a scrupulous and continuous discipline of *self-limitation*: sexual pleasures, desires,

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 236–37 and *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 80.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2005), p. 228.

¹⁶ Foucault mostly relies on a close reading of Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* (ed. Daniel E. Harris-McCoy [Oxford, 2012]) in order to schematically describe the differences between the Greek and the Roman experience of *aphrodisia*. For a detailed analysis of Artemidorus' book, see also Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986), pp. 3–36 and John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York and London, 1990), pp. 17–44.

¹⁷ See also, on this point, Paul Veyne, "Homosexuality in Ancient Rome," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Béjin (Oxford, 1985), pp. 29–30.

and acts are not considered as bad in themselves, but they are conceived of as (potentially) dangerous forces that the individual should master by means of a rational “stylistics” of their use. On the other hand, the “principle of socio-sexual isomorphism” (*ST*, p. 102), according to which, in order to be positively valorized, sexual acts have to be isomorphic to the type of social relations existing between the sexual partners.¹⁸ For instance, while it would be legitimate for a married man to have (active) sexual intercourse with his wife *and* with his slave, since both of them are subject to his authority, it would not be legitimate for him to sleep with his neighbor’s wife, because this kind of sexual relation would be heteromorphic to the social one—it would conflict with his neighbor’s authority and rights (*ST*, pp. 77–83). Hence, these two principles define Greek *aphrodisia* not as an essential feature of subjectivity, but as a unitary bloc of pleasures, desires, and acts that are positively or negatively evaluated depending on the kind of relations one has with others.

However, drawing inspiration from the works of Paul Veyne,¹⁹ Foucault claims that these principles were profoundly modified during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, when marriage started to be considered (at least by the socio-cultural elite) as the only framework for legitimate sexual intercourse.²⁰ As a consequence, on the one hand, the “passive” role, traditionally identified with the woman’s, started to be positively valorized through an unprecedented insistence on reciprocity of sentiments and pleasures, on sexual consent, mutual fidelity, and the construction of a shared life. On the other hand, the socio-sexual “continuum” was broken, since the married couple started to be considered as a specific social entity, *irreducible* to all the other types of social relations (*ST*, pp. 123 ff.).

Foucault is particularly interested in this rupture of the socio-sexual continuum, a rupture that entails, he argues, the necessity for the married man to carefully dissociate his social authority from his sexual virility—whereas, in the Greek regime of *aphrodisia*, virility was simultaneously social and sexual. Thus, a *split* is produced and the individual is required to define two different modalities of relation to his own sex: “A statutory modality coextensive with the field of social relations and a relational modality coextensive solely with conjugality” (*ST*, p. 283). It is precisely in order to establish, maintain, and renew this double relation to his

¹⁸ See also, on this point, Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, pp. 32–33 and David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York and London, 1990), pp. 30–33.

¹⁹ See Paul Veyne, “La famille et l’amour sous le Haut-Empire romain,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 33, no. 1 (1978): 35–63.

²⁰ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, pp. 72–80.

own sex that the individual is asked to elaborate a permanent relation with himself. This is why, Foucault argues, desire is conceived of, for the first time in Western history, as the element on which the whole problem of the *aphrodisia* has to be centered. Indeed, the individual is “constantly tempted, led, brought to make [his] sexual activity overflow onto [his] status as individual endowed with a sex,” and therefore he needs to exercise his mastery not only on his acts, but *before them*, on their source—that is, desire (*ST*, pp. 285–86). Hence, through a series of specific techniques of the self,²¹ desire is “isolated,” “extracted” from the unitary bloc of *aphrodisia*, and treated as “the form par excellence of the manifestation in [the individual] of the very principle of sexual activity” (*ST*, pp. 286, 288). This is how, Foucault concludes, the Western (male) individual started to consider desire as a fundamental feature of his own subjectivity—the first step toward the elaboration of a “singular, permanent, subjective bond between the individual and his own sex as principle of activity” (*ST*, p. 282).

Foucault is thus far from presenting Greco-Roman sexual ethics as an ethics of absolute freedom and pure creativity, as it has sometimes been argued. He did not aim to suggest that we should somehow try to *reactivate* or *recreate* this ethics in our contemporary world.²² Instead, he was interested in emphasizing that Greco-Roman sexual ethics, although intrinsically connected to the norms organizing a patriarchal and discriminatory society, was elaborated in a fashion (relatively) autonomous from any definite set of religious, juridical, or scientific principles. The *possibility* of such a (relative) independence of the field of sexual ethics, and of ethics *tout court*, from religion, law, and science, is no doubt one of the most relevant ideas for

²¹ Foucault refers, for instance, to the discipline of representations that is to be found in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius: “The sage Epictetus presents is not, like Socrates, someone who while desiring, resists his desire. It is Epictetus who, seeing a beautiful woman or an attractive youth, does not even experience any desire. And it is here, in this self-mastery exerted at the very root of the *aphrodisia*, that is to say at the level of *epithumia* itself, it is in the eradication of *epithumia* that self-mastery manifests itself” (*ST*, p. 266). See, e.g., Epictetus, *The Discourses*, III, 3, 14–15 (trans. William A. Oldfather): “Go out of the house at early dawn, and no matter whom you see or whom you hear, examine him and then answer as you would to a question. What did you see? A handsome man or a handsome woman. Apply the rule. Is it outside the province of the moral purpose, or inside? Outside. Away with it.”

²² See, e.g., Michel Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” trans. Thomas Levin and Isabelle Lorenz, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London, 1988), p. 244, where Foucault claims that the Greeks and their ethics centered on the notion of a “style of existence” were neither exemplary nor admirable, and (laughing) that all of antiquity seemed to him to have been a “profound error.”

our own present that Foucault wanted to draw from his detailed investigation of the ancient techniques of the self.²³

There is, however, a significant hesitation in Foucault's lectures on *Subjectivity and Truth*. On the one hand, it seems clear that Foucault wishes to isolate, at the heart of the Roman "culture of the self," a process of crystallization of desire linked not only to a "reflexive stance,"²⁴ but also to the constitution of "a relationship of self to self that is at the same time a relationship of objectivation" (*ST*, p. 285). In other words, the emergence of desire in a series of Stoic texts on the arts of living bears a stunning resemblance to what, in a Christian context, will eventually be called "temptation" (*ST*, p. 288) and to the excavation in the subject of an inner space of thoughts and feelings that one can and should know in order to correctly take care of oneself. But in a passage of the manuscript that Foucault did not read out, he argues that it is only within a Christian framework that "the objectivation of the subject of desire" takes place, that "the subject of desire as object of knowledge appears in the West" (*ST*, p. 287, footnote).

Foucault will soon overcome this hesitation, unambiguously abandoning the idea that the relation to oneself in ancient Greco-Roman philosophy could be described in terms of an objectivation of the self.²⁵ Indeed, as Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it, "the [ancient] subject does not make up a closed, interior world he must penetrate in order to find himself—or rather to discover himself."²⁶ In Greco-Roman antiquity, "self-consciousness is the apprehension of self in a 'he,' and not yet in an 'I.'"²⁷ The first-person standpoint or—as Charles Taylor calls it—the "radical reflexivity" connected to the idea that "we are creatures with inner depths, with partly unexplored and dark interiors"²⁸ that we are incited to decipher in order to know who we truly are, will ultimately be considered by Foucault as a Christian invention.

It is not surprising, then, that in the second, third, and fourth volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault establishes a sharper opposition between the Greco-Roman experience of

²³ Michel Foucault, "Débat au Département d'Histoire de l'Université de Californie à Berkeley," in *Qu'est-ce que la critique?: Suivi de La culture de soi*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris, 2015), p. 143.

²⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 130.

²⁵ See Daniele Lorenzini, *Éthique et politique de soi: Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les techniques de l'ordinaire* (Paris, 2015), pp. 203–12.

²⁶ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Individual within the City-State," trans. James Lawler, revised by Froma I. Zeitlin, in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1991), p. 328.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 329. Vernant is quoting Bernard Groethuysen's formula (*Anthropologie philosophique* [Paris, 1980], p. 61).

²⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 111.

aphrodisia (now considered as more or less unitary) and the Christian experience of the flesh. In *The Use of Pleasures*, for instance, he argues that, while the Greco-Roman arts of existence dealt with acts and pleasures, the Christian ones were essentially focused on “the decipherment of the self, purification procedures, and struggles against concupiscence” (UP, p. 254). In other words, the Christian problematization of sexual conduct was no longer centered on “pleasure and the aesthetics of its use,” but on “desire and its purifying hermeneutics” (UP, p. 254). However, this schematic opposition does not do justice to the premises and actual outcomes of Foucault’s genealogical analysis. Indeed, the aim of Foucault’s genealogy of the subject of desire is, by definition, not so much to provide an exact “birth date” of the latter, that is, to isolate a single origin for it. Genealogy, as Foucault claims, drawing from Nietzsche, “laugh[s] at the solemnities of the origin.”²⁹ Its objective, in this case, is rather to show how, from an experience of one’s body, pleasures, desires, and acts conceived of as a unitary “package” (the Greek *aphrodisia*), one element—desire—has been *progressively* detached and given a privileged, strategic role as the point of application of a series of techniques of the self that, over the course of several transformations, will eventually give rise to the Christian experience of the flesh.

The Prison of the Body

The crucial issue that Foucault addresses in *Les aveux de la chair* in order to retrace the emergence of the subject of desire is that of the complex correlation between virginal and married life in early Christianity, from the end of the second century to the beginning of the fifth century. He starts by analyzing in detail Clement of Alexandria’s *Paedagogus* and *Stromata*, and shows that Clement does not condemn sexual activity in itself, does not confront the flesh (that is, the body of concupiscence) with a principle of absolute renunciation, but rather insists on the essential role that one’s own will should play in order not to let oneself be overcome by sexual desires (AC, p. 44). Therefore, according to Foucault, we find in Clement’s texts, at the

²⁹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 79. See on this point Raymond Geuss, “Nietzsche and Genealogy,” in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 3–4.

end of the second century, a Christian “code of temperance” (*sophrosyne*) testifying to a significant continuity with respect to the pagan “culture of the self” (*AC*, pp. 40, 365).

But soon thereafter, a series of important transformations started to take place in Christian sexual morality, laying the ground for Augustine’s treatment of the notion of libido. Foucault tightly connects these modifications to the development of the discipline of penance and of monastic asceticism, which significantly contributed to the definition of a new mode of relation to oneself and of an unprecedented way of addressing the problem of the relations between “wrong-doing” and “truth-telling” (*AC*, p. 50). Foucault argues, more precisely, that monastic asceticism elaborated a practice—*exagoreusis*, that is, a perpetual examination of oneself by means of the uninterrupted avowal of one’s own thoughts to a director of conscience—whose objective, the contemplation of God, was to be achieved thanks to the abandonment of one’s own will and a radical renunciation of oneself connected to a permanent duty of obedience (*AC*, pp. 133–45).³⁰ Thus, according to Foucault, the practice of *exagoreusis* gave form not only to a new type of experience (*AC*, p. 365) defined by a specific way of linking remission of sins, manifestation of truth, and discovery of the self, but also to a whole new “form of subjectivity” centered on its essential relation to the flesh (*AC*, p. 50).

In *Les aveux de la chair*, Foucault explores this new form of subjectivity by focusing on the problem of virginity which, he argues, from Basil of Ancyra to Jerome and Cassian, was not elaborated in the form of a universal imperative of abstinence. On the contrary, in their fight against the Encratites (who conceived of the renunciation of marriage and sexual intercourse as a necessary condition for salvation),³¹ the Church Fathers defined virginity as a privileged, positive, but rare experience, without making it an obligation for everyone. In other words, they recommended virginity not as a universal, compulsory interdiction, but as a *practice* to be carefully distinguished both from a (pagan) principle of continence and from a radical imperative of abstinence for everyone (*AC*, pp. 151–53). In order to address this issue, as Peter Brown and Elaine Pagels will also do a few years later, Foucault focuses his attention on the controversies that developed, from Origen to Augustine, around the interpretation of the first

³⁰ See also Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, pp. 223 ff.

³¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), p. 391.

three chapters of the Book of Genesis and the problem of sex in Paradise.³² He thus shows that, against the dualistic thesis of the evil origin of the difference of sexes, the Church Fathers argued that such a difference was already there in Paradise, before the Fall, but claimed either that the first sexual intercourse between Adam and Eve was the direct cause of the Fall, or that it took place after the Fall as one of its consequences (*AC*, pp. 189–90).³³

According to John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, human beings could already reproduce in Paradise through what they call “angelic multiplication,” that is, without the need for any sexual intercourse. It was only after the Fall, and as a consequence of it, that human reproduction became “animal-like” (*AC*, pp. 190–91). Therefore, in his *De Virginitate* (XII, 4 and XIII, 3), Gregory of Nyssa conceives of virginity not only as the individual liberation from sin, but also as a moment of transfiguration of the world, as a return to a heavenly condition—a return that implies a radical change of existence and is inscribed at the heart of a “general history of the salvation of humankind” (*AC*, pp. 186, 191–92). This is what Foucault calls the “mysticism of virginity”: in these texts, virginity is presented as a positive and complex experience based on a personal choice capable of transforming the whole of one’s life, as an element of a world without death and a principle of transfiguration directly pointing toward a new age of perfection for humankind (*AC*, pp. 193, 196).

In an article published in 1985, Peter Brown offers a socio-political reading of these controversies that it is helpful to combine with Foucault’s account. According to Peter Brown, in early Christianity, “the debate about virginity was in large part a debate about the nature of human solidarity.”³⁴ Indeed, by the fourth century, to uphold virginity “was to commit oneself, by implication, to a different image of the grounds of cohesion of society,” a society that was founded on marriage and procreation. To uphold virginity meant to claim the right to dispose of one’s own body as one pleased, to keep it “out of circulation in society,” thus resisting the force of social convention.³⁵ From this point of view, one could say that virginity was a form of

³² For a systematic account of the way in which Christian interpretations of Genesis 1–3 were elaborated from the second to the fifth century and used to establish or justify Christians’ beliefs, see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York, 1988).

³³ See Peter Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York, 1985), p. 430.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 429, 434–35.

social “counter-conduct,”³⁶ tightly connected to a “de-mystified” or “de-naturalized” vision of society. “The existing human community,” Peter Brown argues, “is seen as no more than the factitious creation of a sexual social contract.”³⁷ This is why exponents of the mysticism of virginity, defending individual freedom to withhold one’s body to society, were also often committed to the ideal of the creation of “alternative forms of social grouping,” of a society “no longer held together by a sexual social contract” and which, along with marriage, might therefore also abandon “those other great ‘dividing walls’ associated with a normal, marriage-based, society—the institution of slavery and the exclusion of women.”³⁸ Therefore, the possibility to withdraw one’s body from society soon became a concern, and Augustine’s insistence on the crucial socio-political importance of marriage can be seen precisely as a way of “neutralizing” the virginal counter-conduct and to fight against the ideal of an alternative social order, providing stronger grounds for the elaboration of a pastoral government of human beings endorsing the existing sexual social contract.³⁹

However, before addressing Augustine’s writings, Foucault retraces the emergence, in the fourth-century monastic asceticism, of an “art” or “technology of virginity” establishing that a director of conscience is necessary for anyone who wishes to lead a virginal existence (*AC*, pp. 161, 178). In the texts of Basil of Ancyra and Cassian, virginity begins to be conceived as a

³⁶ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 201 ff. On the ethico-political relevance of this notion, see Arnold I. Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” *History of the Human Sciences* 24, no. 4 (2011): 25–41. On the relation between the notions of counter-conduct and critical attitude, and on the crucial role played by the will (of not being governed thusly) in Foucault’s account of the latter, see Daniele Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much,” *Foucault Studies* 21 (2016): 7–21.

³⁷ Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” p. 430.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 430–31. In *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown develops in more detail his analysis of the Christian practices of permanent sexual renunciation from the first to the fifth century and their links with the structure and meaning of society, but refers only once to the creation of society by a tacit sexual social contract. See Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 94.

³⁹ See Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 400: “From around 400 until the end of his life, Augustine invariably wrote of Adam and Eve as physical human beings, endowed with the same bodies and sexual characteristics as ourselves. God had created them for the joys of society. . . . They had been set in Paradise to found a *populus*; and to found a *populus* implied more than the disembodied meeting of like-minded souls. It involved physical intercourse, childbirth, and the rearing of children. Adam and Eve’s original state even implied a measure of hierarchy: Augustine’s exegesis validated the rule of men over women and the rule of the father over his children as part of God’s original order.”

specific type of relation to one's thoughts rather than to one's body—a relation tightly connected to a principle of permanent obedience to the other. Indeed, Basil and Cassian insist on the necessity for the individual to exercise perpetual vigilance and control over the tiniest movements of his thought (*cogitationes*), since they conceive of the purity of the body as a direct consequence of the purity of the soul (AC, pp. 211–14). They thus found the practice of spiritual direction on the principle of a complete visibility of the soul, which has to be continuously exposed to one's own gaze as well as to the gaze of the other, and inscribe the issue of virginity within a twofold process that Foucault describes in terms of the “subjection [*assujettissement*] of the individual” and the “objectivation of his interiority” (AC, p. 215).

Hence, Foucault's provocative thesis is that Christian, or more precisely, monastic technologies of the self did not develop around the notion of sin, but around that of temptation: the essential moment of the spiritual struggle does not focus on acts or relations with others, but on a perpetual self-examination. Within this “microcosm of solitude” (AC, p. 238), the issue is no longer penetration, but erection, and the problem becomes that of detaching the individual's will from the spirit of fornication. As a consequence, nocturnal emission is considered as the “analyzer” (*analyseur*) of concupiscence, or better, of the actual degree of implication of the individual's will in the involuntary movements of desire (AC, p. 241). The modern “crusade” against child masturbation has ancient roots.⁴⁰

To sum up, then, from Tertullian to Cassian, Foucault does not detect a gradual reinforcement of interdictions or a growing disqualification of sexual acts, but rather the progressive excavation of the depths of an internal world—“*la profondeur d'une scène intérieure*” (AC, pp. 243–44).⁴¹ The individual is asked to perform a perpetual analysis of his own thoughts in order to monitor them—their origins, their characteristics, their dangers. This permanent vigilance upon and suspicion of oneself define, according to Foucault, both a process of *subjectivation* of sexual acts and a process of never-ending *objectivation* of the self through the perpetual production of a discourse about oneself allowing one to submit one's own will to the will of the other (AC, pp. 244–45).

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity,” trans. Anthony Forster, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997), pp. 185–86, footnote.

⁴¹ Foucault's account of the emergence of personal interiority is therefore very different from Nietzsche's analysis of “the *internalization* of man” conceived of as the turning inward of all the instincts that could not be discharged outwardly, and hence as the origin of “bad conscience” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson [Cambridge, 2006], p. 57).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault famously claimed that the soul, as an “effect and instrument of a political anatomy,” is the “prison of the body.”⁴² A few years later, *Les aveux de la chair* traces the historical constitution of such a spiritual prison back to the monastic techniques of examination of the self and direction of conscience, in what could therefore also be seen as a genealogy of the modern disciplines.

In Interiore Homine Habitat Libido

If the monastic technology of virginity already contributed to the “deactivation” of the potential threat posed to the social order by the mystics of virginity, I argue that Foucault’s account of Augustine’s writings clearly suggests that they constitute the most important contribution to the development of the pastorate as a political (and not only a spiritual) art of governing human beings. In the third and last part of *Les aveux de la chair*, devoted to the issue of marriage, Foucault presents Augustine as the one who both “summarized” the first three and a half centuries of Christian thought and “inaugurated” some of the fundamental features that will define Christian sexual ethics until the present time.⁴³ As Peter Brown argues in his 1983 article “Augustine and Sexuality,” whose typescript is to be found in the Foucault archives together with the manuscript of *Les aveux de la chair*, “genius marks not the beginning of an epoch, but its conclusion.”⁴⁴ Unlike Charles Taylor, who presents Augustine’s works (and notably the *Confessions*) as a radical turning point in the history of the constitution of the modern Western notion of selfhood—a turning point that consists, according to him, in the enactment of a radical self-reflexive gaze connected to a new anxiety over the unexamined self⁴⁵—Foucault never ceases to insist on the fact that Augustine stands at the end of a long tradition. However, the specificities of Augustine’s thought that Foucault emphasizes point

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), p. 30.

⁴³ See also Michel Foucault, *Dire vrai sur soi-même: Conférences prononcées à l’Université Victoria de Toronto, 1982*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris, 2017), p. 285.

⁴⁴ Peter Brown, “Augustine and Sexuality,” *The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture: Colloquy* 46 (1983): 1–13.

⁴⁵ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 131: “Augustine’s turn to the self was a turn to radical reflexivity, and that is what made the language of inwardness irresistible. The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves; it is the one inseparable from our being creatures with a first-person standpoint.”

directly toward the constitution of the necessary conditions for a juridification of sexual behavior that will eventually play a major role in the history of Christianity and of Western society more broadly.

Augustine inherits from an already extensive tradition the idea that, while virginity is superior to marriage from a spiritual perspective, marriage is not in itself bad and virginity is not to be conceived of as a universal obligation. During the fourth century, an “art of married life” was elaborated as a way of “balancing” the ascetic choice of chastity and opposing the most radical (and potentially dangerous) effects of the ideal of virginity through a spiritual valorization of the life of ordinary people (*AC*, p. 250). A “pastoral of everyday life,” that is, an unprecedented “colonization” of individual existence in its most ordinary and private dimensions, thus started to be organized around the married couple (*AC*, pp. 252–53). At the same time, Foucault shows that, from Origen to John Chrysostom, marriage is primarily defined not on the basis of its procreative function, but in its relation to virginity and voluntary celibacy (*AC*, p. 269): it is conceived of as an instrument of limitation of the most dangerous effects of concupiscence, as a principle of moderation requiring the husband to make do with his wife and vice-versa (*AC*, p. 272). This is why, commenting on John Chrysostom’s nineteenth homily on 1 Corinthians (1–2) and *De Virginitate* (XLVII, 1–2), Foucault claims that sexual intercourse between husband and wife has less the aim of procreation than of helping each other regulate their respective concupiscence (*AC*, pp. 280–81).⁴⁶ Therefore, marriage is also inscribed within an *individual* economy of desire: it is a way of disciplining concupiscence that takes a juridical form, since while virginity is only a moral recommendation, marriage is an obligation for anyone who is not capable of leading a virginal life (*AC*, p. 273). But the technologies of virginity and the arts of married life were both elaborated in response to the issue of individual concupiscence: “Even in the dual form of marriage, the fundamental problem is what one should do with her own concupiscence; it is therefore the relation of oneself to oneself” (*AC*, p. 282).

Augustine himself will never cease to defend these ideas throughout his life, fighting both against those who disparage marriage while praising virginity and against those who put

⁴⁶ The idea that one of the fundamental objectives of marriage is linked to the “conjugal duty,” that is, the duty to help one’s partner attain salvation, can be found in Augustine as well. In his *De Bono Coniugali*, he explains that, in order to avoid an “overflow” of concupiscence leading one to commit a mortal sin, it is permissible to satisfy one’s concupiscence conjugally, thus committing—as a couple—only a venial sin (*AC*, pp. 319–22).

virginity and marriage on the same spiritual level.⁴⁷ However, unlike his predecessors, Augustine chooses to focus his attention specifically on marriage, attributing to it a privileged place in the order of divine creation. He thus methodologically reverses the hierarchy in favor of marriage, or better, he rigorously defines a theological and philosophical framework that allows him to address *simultaneously* marriage and virginity, to develop *simultaneously* an asceticism of chastity and a morality of marriage (AC, pp. 287–88).

In his detailed analysis of Augustine’s writings, Foucault focuses on the problem of the relation between marriage and Fall, showing that Augustine significantly transforms the traditional ideas presented in the previous section. Far from being the cause or a direct consequence of the Fall, sexual intercourse is conceived of by Augustine, already in his *De Bono Coniugali* and then in *De Genesi ad Litteram* and the fourteenth book of *De Civitate Dei*, as something which could have taken place even before the Fall, and thus freed from the stigma of fallen human existence (AC, p. 300). Even in Paradise the multiplication of human beings was a good to be pursued, as it contributed to augmenting the beauty of creation. Hence, Augustine offers a carnal interpretation of the divine injunction to multiply, and he attributes an unambiguously positive value to the difference of the sexes: the “help” that Eve is supposed to provide to Adam is directly connected to procreation, that is, to the establishment and development of a society (*societas*).⁴⁸ In fact, for Augustine, marriage as a form of association is the basic element of society, allowing the multiplication of humankind and hence of spiritual relationships (AC, pp. 301–2). This is why the “marriage” of the first couple in Paradise entailed at least the possibility, if not the reality, of a physical union, which is thus clearly detached from the economy of the Fall (AC, pp. 303–4).⁴⁹

However, Foucault shows that, starting in 412–413, Augustine begins to criticize the “ethics of non-excess” that he defended in his *De Bono Coniugali* (X, 11), that is, the idea that sexual intercourse is without sin, or that it only entails a venial sin, when it is indexed to procreation and takes place within marriage (AC, p. 328). Indeed, this idea seemed to suggest that sexual intercourse, *even after the Fall*, is not in itself bad and therefore that one must simply avoid the transgression of a well-defined limit. But for Augustine, who wanted to reject both the Manichean conception of libido as an evil inscribed from the outset in human nature and the

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, XVIII, 18.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, IX, 9, 15.

⁴⁹ See Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 403.

Pelagian conception of libido as a natural appetite that does not compromise the original innocence of human beings,⁵⁰ the problem with this notion of excess is that it traces evil only to the “too much” and leaves the nature of desire intact (*AC*, pp. 328–29).

Hence, in his *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, *Contra Iulianum*, and *De Civitate Dei*, while criticizing both a global disqualification of sexual acts through the notion of impurity and an external “delimitation” of them through the notion of excess, Augustine accomplishes in Foucault’s eyes a move that turns out to be crucial for the history of “our morality”: he defines, *within* the sexual act itself, a divide anterior to excess, which indicates that evil is inherent to any sexual act, or better, that libido is a *structural* element of it, while also maintaining that it was the Fall that introduced libido for the first time in the nature of the sexual act. In other words, Augustine conceptually dissociates sexual acts and libido, explaining how heavenly sex was “libidinized” (*AC*, p. 329).⁵¹

Augustine’s crucial relevance for what I call a political history of the will lies precisely in his conceptual elaboration of a whole “libidinal apparatus” that he connects to a juridical model. As he argues in the fourteenth book of *De Civitate Dei*, if before the Fall Adam and Eve’s sexual organs and desires perfectly obeyed their will (*voluntas*),⁵² the Fall introduced a structural involuntary principle of action in the human will. The “involuntary” (*involontaire*) breaks into the “voluntary” (*volontaire*), since the divine punishment of Adam is the exact reproduction, the “repetition” in him of his own disobedience to God.⁵³ In other words, God’s punishment consists in the revolt of man against himself, in the creation of a *split* in his will, which is turned against itself and inevitably slips away from what it wills (*AC*, pp. 333–34).⁵⁴ After the Fall, the (male) sex rises against man precisely as man has risen against God: it no longer obeys the human will, as it did before, but is for man what man is now for God—a rebel (*AC*, p. 336). In Augustine’s view, the sin par excellence is egotism: the arrogance of man who thinks himself to

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 412–13.

⁵¹ Foucault had already presented some of his ideas on this topic in the last pages of the article “Sexuality and Solitude,” trans. Robert Hurley, in *Ethics*, pp. 180–83.

⁵² Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 402.

⁵³ See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 15 (trans. Marcus Dods): “In short, to say all in a word, what but disobedience was the punishment of disobedience in that sin? For what else is man’s misery but his own disobedience to himself, so that in consequence of his not being willing to do what he could do, he now wills to do what he cannot?”

⁵⁴ See Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 417.

be self-sufficient and prefers himself to God.⁵⁵ Libido is defined precisely as the arrogant insurrection of man against God, a dimension that now characterizes *every* sexual act of the fallen humanity. The subject is “libidinized,” her constitution as a fallen being is marked by the inevitable inscription of libido in the very structure of her subjectivity (*AC*, pp. 338–39).⁵⁶

Therefore, Foucault argues that the function of this notion of libido is not exactly to make sexual acts impure or unclean: it is rather to make them *involuntary*, while explicitly inscribing this involuntary element *in* the will itself. Peter Brown writes: “At the very instant that [Adam and Eve] decided to make themselves no longer available to the will of God, parts of their own bodies and of their own feelings silently ceased to be available at their own will.”⁵⁷ Foucault’s argument is more radical, and deliberately paradoxical: *it is a part of their own will that ceased to be available at their own will*. Indeed, according to Foucault’s reading, Augustine conceives of libido as the turning of the human will against itself. The divide between the voluntary and the involuntary no longer corresponds to that between soul and body, but consists in a split in the subject’s own will defining an entirely new mode of subjectivation. For Foucault, concupiscence is not defined by Augustine as an involuntary force that *eludes* the will, but as the involuntary aspect *of* the will itself, as that element without which the will could not will (*AC*, pp. 342–44)—an unexpected Arendtian formulation.⁵⁸ This is why Augustine eventually argues that the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 418: “Augustine was exceptionally careful to point out . . . that *the flesh* was not simply the body: it was all that led the self to prefer its own will to that of God.” See also Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 138.

⁵⁶ Foucault had already reached these conclusions in his 1980 seminar at the New York Institute for the Humanities, in which he presented a synthetic overview of what, two years later, will eventually become the final version of *Les aveux de la chair*. See Michel Foucault, “Séminaire N.Y.U.,” unpublished manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, box 40.

⁵⁷ Brown, “Augustine and Sexuality.”

⁵⁸ The analogies between Foucault’s and Arendt’s accounts of the Augustinian notion of the “divided will” are striking. Indeed, relying on some passages from the eighth book of the *Confessions* (see, e.g., Augustine, *Confessiones*, VIII, 10 [trans. Edward B. Pusey]: “Myself when I was deliberating upon serving the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed, it was I who willed, I who nilled, I, I myself. I neither willed entirely, nor nilled entirely. Therefore was I at strife with myself, and rent asunder by myself”), Arendt presents Augustine as the inventor of the philosophical notion of the will and focuses on his description of the struggle, *within* the human soul, of *two wills*, one carnal and the other spiritual: “The split occurs in the will itself; the conflict arises neither out of a split between mind and will nor out of a split between flesh and mind. . . . A will that would be ‘entire,’ without a counter-will, could no longer be a will properly speaking” (Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Volume 2: “Willing” [San Diego, 1978], pp. 87, 94–95).

subject is obligated to recognize that she can will the good only thanks to the help of grace. In fact, when she arrogantly wills her own will, the subject necessarily submits to the law of concupiscence: will and concupiscence do not confront each other as independent, opposing elements, but are strictly intertwined in the nature of fallen man, so that the latter could never hope to overcome concupiscence without an “external” intervention—that of divine grace.⁵⁹

The Politics of Paradise⁶⁰

The final pages of *Les aveux de la chair* suggest that Augustine inaugurated not only a new form of subjectivity, but also the possibility of an entirely new way of conducting human beings through a juridification of the government of souls and the sexual behavior of the married couple.⁶¹ Indeed, Foucault’s bold thesis is that Augustine initiated an endeavor that will characterize Christianity for a very long time: conceiving of the sinner as a subject of law, or better, joining together the subject of desire and the subject of law through the establishment of the subject’s liability for her acts of concupiscence by means of an unprecedented elaboration of the notions of “consent” and “use” (*AC*, pp. 351–52).

On the one hand, while Cassian, for instance, argues that sin has its origin in the act of willing *that* which one’s concupiscence desires, and therefore that consent or refusal are to be exercised upon the object of desire (Cassian’s problem, in other words, is: should one desire this object or not?), Augustine conceives of sin as originating in the act of the will willing *itself* in the form of concupiscence, so that consent or refusal are to be exercised within and upon one’s own will (*AC*, pp. 353–54). The subject has to take *herself* as the object of her examination, thus asking whether she should will the concupiscent form of her own will or not.

⁵⁹ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 131. See also Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 118, 174: “Augustine opens a distinctly new chapter in the history of the will by describing it as a precognitive, pre-emotional faculty, partly beyond the control and understanding of man’s conscious self”—this is why, for Augustine, “mastery of the will was humanly impossible[: s]ex came to epitomize . . . the recalcitrance of the will.”

⁶⁰ I borrow this title from that of the fifth chapter of Elaine Pagels’ book, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, pp. 98 ff.

⁶¹ Already in 1982, Foucault claimed that Augustine was the first who managed to translate in juridical terms the spiritual experiences of early Christianity. See Foucault, *Dire vrai sur soi-même*, p. 283.

Therefore, consent (*consensus*)—which is the necessary condition for the constitution of an act *imputable* to a subject in the form of a sin—is not conceived by Augustine simply as the principle of transformation of desire into an act, but rather as an act of the will upon itself, and upon its form rather than its object. When the subject “consents,” she does not open the door to a desired object: instead, she constitutes and seals herself as a subject who desires. This is why, Foucault concludes, libido is actually imputable to her and she can be described *simultaneously* as a subject of desire and of law (AC, pp. 354–55).

On the other hand, Foucault argues that, within this framework, the notion of use (*usus*) becomes crucial again, as it already was in the Greco-Roman regime of *aphrodisia*, but in a completely transformed sense. Indeed, according to Augustine, in their conjugal intercourse, husband and wife make use of an evil, since evil is now unavoidably inscribed into sexual acts, but the question of sin has to be raised in relation to the *kind of use* they actually make of this evil, that is, of libido. The idea of a good or bad use of desires turns out to be strategic in that it allows Augustine to maintain that sin is imputable to the subject. This is why the elaboration of the notion of a “use of desires” which one is responsible for, a sort of reversed correlative of the Greco-Roman notion of a “use of pleasures,” constitutes a fundamental condition for thinking the individual as a subject *both* of desire and of law (AC, pp. 356–58).

Augustine’s writings thus open, in Foucault’s view, an unprecedented set of possibilities for the juridification of sexual relations within the married couple. On the one hand, they allow him to go beyond the idea that sexual intercourse is good in itself, and hence that its codification should be centered on the notion of a “natural” form of the sexual act (relying on the opposition between natural acts and acts against nature). But on the other hand, they also allow him to go beyond the idea that sexual intercourse is bad in itself, and hence that its codification should be centered on a principle of complete abstinence (relying on the opposition between pure and impure acts). Hence, Augustine’s definition of libido as the involuntary element of the subject’s own will which she is nevertheless accountable for, and his original elaboration of the notions of consent and use, prepare the ground for the detailed codification of sexual behavior that will eventually be developed in the Middle Ages (AC, pp. 359–60).

Foucault’s conclusion, in *Les aveux de la chair*, is therefore that, thanks to Augustine, the problematization of sexual conduct becomes the problem of the subject—both the *subject of desire*, whose truth can be discovered only by the subject herself by means of a scrupulous

exploration of her interiority and a perpetual verbalization of her thoughts to the other, and the *subject of law*, whose actions are considered right or wrong according to the relations she establishes with her own concupiscent will. Hence, Foucault makes clear that if desire, as the specific target of a series of techniques of the self, emerged well before Augustine, and if it was not Augustine who for the first time conceived of it as a permanent and essential dimension of the Western subjectivity, it was Augustine who elaborated for the first time an analytic of the subject of desire that tightly connects sex, truth, and law. This analytic of the subject of desire constitutes, I argue, the (historical) condition of possibility of the emergence of the modern apparatus of sexuality, of our *juridico-sexual self*,⁶² as well as of the development of the pastoral arts of government.⁶³

Indeed, pastoral power has been justified on the basis of the (alleged) need of human beings to be governed because they do not, or they no longer, have the possibility to govern themselves in an autonomous way.⁶⁴ However, already in 1980, Foucault insisted on the fact that the subject who is governed in this way remains “free”: it is only because she is free to choose a good or bad use of her desires, and thus because she is *responsible* for this involuntary part of her own will, that governmental operations can be exercised upon her. In other words, the submission of one’s own will to the will of the other does not consist in a “transfer of sovereignty.”⁶⁵ The subject remains free, but since she can no longer trust her own divided will,⁶⁶ she must submit her will to the will of the other in a relationship of permanent and indefinite (voluntary) obedience.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is libido, conceived as the involuntary element

⁶² I borrow this expression from Dawn Herrera Helphand’s insightful response to an early version of this essay.

⁶³ This is why it was not surprising to find a short text explicitly addressing the issue of the pastoral arts of government along with Foucault’s manuscript of *Les aveux de la chair*. In a passage of this text, Foucault argues that the “confessions of the flesh” played a crucial role in the process of institutionalization of the Christian pastorate as “a government of human beings through the manifestation of their individual truth” (*AC*, p. 390).

⁶⁴ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, p. 184.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, p. 229.

⁶⁶ See Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 419: “As a result [of Augustine’s ideas], the ascetic struggle seemed that much more uncertain. No one could gauge his own capacity to resist to subtle and continuous a source of temptation.”

⁶⁷ See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, pp. 229–30: “I refer myself to the other’s will as the principle of my own will, but I must myself will this other’s will. . . . [In direction] there is someone who guides my will, who wants my will to want this or that. And I do not cede my own will, I continue to will, I continue to will to the

of our own will and introduced into our subjectivity after Adam's revolt, that transforms us in *governable subjects*. As Elaine Pagels argues, Adam's original sin, for Augustine, "involved nothing else than [his] prideful attempt to establish his own autonomous self-government," since "obedience, not autonomy, should have been Adam's true glory"; because of his revolt the whole human race is now "incapable of self-government."⁶⁸ In the "politics of Paradise," one could say, lies the origin of our voluntary servitude—or, to use Augustine's expression instead of La Boétie's, our free servitude (*libera servitus*).⁶⁹

Peter Brown once claimed that "sexuality would never be trivial nor merely infamous in the West."⁷⁰ If this is true, it is precisely because sexual desire has been constituted, in early Christianity, not only as the "seismograph of our subjectivity,"⁷¹ but also and at the same time as the essential support of the pastoral government of human beings, by means of a detailed and potentially infinite codification of their sexual behavior. Thus, Foucault's thesis of a Christian, and more precisely Augustinian elaboration of the subject as *simultaneously* subject of desire and of law turns out to be crucial in order to understand the development not at all of a repressive power over sexuality and sexual desire, but rather of a set of "productive" governmental technologies aiming to conduct the conduct of individuals through a specific *mise en discours* of the internal, secret, and hidden truth of their desires (*AC*, p. 338).⁷² This is why I argue that *Les aveux de la chair* constitutes the genealogical premise of Foucault's study not only of pastoral governmentality, but of disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms of power as well, if it is true that at the center of their emergence and conjunction lies the passage from a direction

end, but to will in every detail and at every moment what the other wants me to will." See also Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 173–74.

⁶⁸ Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, pp. 99, 105, 108.

⁶⁹ See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 15 (trans. Marcus Dods): "Therefore, because the sin was a despising of the authority of God—who had created man; who had made him in His own image; who had set him above the other animals; who had placed him in Paradise; who had enriched him with abundance of every kind and of safety; who had laid upon him neither many, nor great, nor difficult commandments, but, in order to make a wholesome obedience easy to him, had given him a single very brief and very light precept by which He reminded that creature whose service was to be free [*libera servitus*] that He was Lord—it was just that condemnation followed, and condemnation such that man, who by keeping the commandments should have been spiritual even in his flesh, became fleshy even in his spirit."

⁷⁰ Brown, "Augustine and Sexuality."

⁷¹ Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," p. 179.

⁷² See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 180–84.

of the individuals' sexual behavior according to the "regime of the flesh" to a government of it according to the "regime of sexuality."⁷³ As Foucault argues in *The Will to Know*, the anatomo-politics of the human body and the bio-politics of population "were not to be joined at the level of a speculative discourse, but in the form of concrete arrangements [*agencements concrets*] that would go on to make up the great technology of power in the nineteenth century: the deployment of sexuality would be one of them, and one of the most important" (*HS*, pp. 139–40).⁷⁴

The political significance of Foucault's history of sexuality, and notably of its ancient chapters, has so far been largely downplayed. But Foucault never ceased to insist on it: in his 1975 lectures at the Collège de France, *Abnormal*, retracing the history of avowal from early Christianity to the seventeenth century, he refers to a "political history of the body";⁷⁵ in *The Will to Know*, speaking of the transformation of the Western individual into a "confessing animal," he evokes the project of a "political history of truth" (*HS*, pp. 59–60). I hope I have shown that these two political histories should in turn be connected with a political history of the will—and of the will to be or not to be governed thusly⁷⁶—that Foucault never fully developed but whose importance his last book might help us to perceive.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, "Les aveux de la chair," unpublished manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, box 86. I am grateful to Frédéric Gros for bringing my attention to this text.

⁷⁴ According to Miguel de Beistegui's compelling account in *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject* (Chicago, 2018), although individuals are no longer conducted *against* their desires but *through* the circulation, the multiplication, and the management of them in the space of the market, we are still predominantly governed as subjects of desire.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni (London, 2003), p. 214.

⁷⁶ See Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que la critique?" in *Qu'est-ce que la critique ?*, pp. 65–66.